

Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ A/2014

All the readings of this Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ bring us at the heart of our Christian life, namely the Eucharist. They invite us to acknowledge Jesus present in the Eucharist and to let him dwell in us through the worthy reception of the Eucharist.

The first reading describes what happened to the people of Israel over the forty years they journeyed in the desert before entering the Holy Land. It recalls in particular the solicitude of God toward them and his care in providing them with food. It gives also the reasons why God did let them go hungry in the desert and eventually gave them food. The text, finally, ends with an exhortation to the people so that they do not forget the blessings received and the one who blessed them in such way.

What is behind this text is the idea that our survival and our success in life depends on God alone. Another idea is the truth that even if we are responsible for our life and our future, it is however, God who blesses what we undertake. The last idea is related to the gratitude every Christian should have about the blessings God bestows upon us.

This text helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel where Jesus presents himself as the bread of life. First of all, Jesus declares that he is the living bread that came down from heaven in order to give life to anyone who eats it.

The Jews who heard Jesus' declaration reacted negatively with doubt and unbelief that he is really what he pretends to be. Finally, the Gospel ends with another declaration of Jesus in which he reaffirms that unless someone eats his flesh and drinks his blood, he cannot have life within him. He also added that his flesh is true food and his blood true drink so that whoever eats them remains in him and he in him as well as he will raise him on the last day.

What do we learn from these readings? Today I want to talk about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Before doing it, I want to situate Jesus' speech in the historical context of the Jewish society that has inspired it.

In fact, for the Jews, the manna was the food par excellence and the symbol of their survival. They were aware of the fact that if they did not receive that miracle food from heaven in the desert, they would have been extinguished because of hunger.

That is why the simple invocation of manna meant a lot for them. It meant God's solicitude and care for the survival of his people as a nation. In such a context, human food was nothing in comparison to the real food that God himself gave the ancestors for their survival. Moreover, it would be not only indecent that someone talks about the manna in a disrespectful way, but even a simple suggestion that there was a food better than that which God gave was, for them, a blasphemy.

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus did by comparing the bread that their ancestors ate in the desert to the bread that he gives. Moreover, without any ambiguity, Jesus states that the bread he is talking about is his flesh he gives for the life of the world to the point that whoever does not eat his flesh and drink his blood does not have life in him.

These words of Jesus were very difficult to swallow for his Jewish listeners. They were shocked and wondering how Jesus could say such a thing. Instead of correcting his

speech, however, he made it even harder by repeating that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they cannot have life within them.

As it stands, this is not a symbolic language as some pretend. In truth, there is identification between the bread that Jesus gives and his own flesh. The bread he gives, gives life in the same way as does his person. That is what the Jews have understood and the reason why they were quarrelling.

We have to remember, however, that anytime that Jesus was misunderstood, he immediately corrected his listeners, like in the case of the death of Lazarus mistaken as sleeping by his disciples or the case of Nicodemus who wondered how to be born again in the womb of his mother, while Jesus was talking about baptism.

The silence of Jesus in the present case is a sign that he meant what he said and they should take it as it was. That would not have been otherwise anyway, because in Hebrew anthropology, flesh, body, blood, stand for the whole person and not for a part of it. Then, we understand why Jesus says that “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day”.

In that perspective, the point of the feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood is to remind us that Jesus is entirely present in the Eucharist. The bread and the chalice we offer at the altar are truly the body and the blood of Jesus.

Because Jesus is present in the Eucharistic bread and wine, he can say, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him”. So, by receiving the body and the blood of Christ, we become one with him and are united with him who feeds us so that we might have eternal life. At the same time, because Christ we receive in the Eucharist is alive, he gives life to our body too so that even when die, we may live with him.

Moreover, when we celebrate the Eucharist, we live the mysterious presence of our Lord within us and within our community. By sharing the body and the blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we partake in the mystery of his life he offered once and for all on the cross. That is why the Eucharist is concomitant to all times, all spaces and all generations.

The Eucharist realizes the communion with our Lord Jesus and with our brothers and sisters. It has a double sense of making present in time the sacrifice of the cross and maintaining our union with Christ through our unity with one another. As St Paul says, “The cup of blessing that we bless is a participation in the blood of Christ. The bread we break is a participation in the body of Christ. Because the loaf of bread is one, we though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf”.

Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us to receive him worthily so that he remains in us and we in him. Let us ask the Lord to give us life as we receive him in the Eucharist. God bless you all!

Deuteronomy 8: 2-3, 14b-16a; 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17; John 6: 51-58



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